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From Demanding Emancipation to Negotiating Autonomy: Conflicting Identifications in a Changing World

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ABSTRACT *In this paper I try to describe the central role that my involvement in the ideological climate of the seventies through participation in the feminist movement in Greece played in my professional practice as a psychotherapist and how these experiences informed a research project that I undertook in order to examine the changes in the identificatory process of Greek women. My personal, political and professional experiences interlinked in order to plan and realize this research project, which dealt with how femininity is constituted through the mother-daughter relationship in a period when the traditional position of women is rapidly changing in Greece. The results of the research show the difficulty of the passage from emancipation to autonomy, from certainty to uncertainty, from a politics of identity to a politics of conflicting and contradicting identifications, which the postmodern subject has to go through. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

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In this paper, I will try to take you with me on a long and, I hope, sufficiently interesting and indicative journey. It will start in a city in northern Greece with a young girl growing to become a woman in the 1950s and 1960s and will end in the year 2001 with the submission of a doctoral thesis dealing with conflicting identifications in women through the mother-daughter relationship. This has been a vital journey for me, in that it combined a life's purpose with the search for collective meaning. This is how I have understood, in my own itinerary, the project that in this journal comes under the title *Psychotherapy and Politics*. In my experience psychotherapy has proved to be a politics of the self', while politics

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should, at best, be a therapy of the social; I use the word therapy here in its Ancient Greek meaning of taking care (*therapeuein*).

I grew up as a child and adolescent in Thessaloniki, a rapidly growing city in northern Greece, during the 1950s and 1960s. I remember my adolescence as a continuous struggle between conflicting and contradictory worlds. On one hand, the world I was experiencing within my middle-class family and the surrounding social environment, with the stereotypical distribution of gendered roles, which greatly influenced the lives and being of women and men. On the other, the new ideas that were flooding us from abroad and entering our homes and our schools through music, literature, fashion, social and political ideologies. These ideas, which declared the demolition of stereotypes and roles and the emergence of a new feeling of freedom, having as its most essential feature the right to be different, indirectly influenced even our parents themselves. I will briefly remind you here that Greece was a country only very recently emerging from a traditional rural society to a modern urban one – a country only very recently emerging from the Second World War and from a very destructive civil war, which brought a great upheaval to familiar, well loved and apparently self-evident notions of family and social relationships.

In this sociohistorical environment I was growing up to become a woman like my mother, who was nevertheless allowed for the first time in generations to use freely almost all the privileges of my father's gender. This means that I was growing up, according to my mother's model, to be subordinate to my husband, dependent on him both financially and emotionally, living within the limits of our home in order to nurture our children and care for the rest of the family; and at the same time I was allowed, even encouraged, by these same parents and especially by my mother, to go out of the house, to study and work so that I would become financially emancipated and independent of emotional needs. In the beginning, this seemed like a great opportunity that I tried to take advantage of as much and as best as I could. It was only later and very gradually as I grew up, that I was confronted with a deep existential dilemma concerning the limits and the meaning of this opportunity, a dilemma that was far beyond me as a Greek woman of my time. I believe that it was this agonizing search for meaning that led me to study psychology and later to become involved in the feminist movement and psychoanalysis. At first I trained in the theory and practice of Wilhelm Reich, because it tried, as I understood it, to make a radical, combined analysis of the different levels that constitute human experience: the psychic, the social and the bodily. At the same time, it was the only current psychological theory that took seriously into consideration the oppression of women within the patriarchal families of the Western world. As I worked as a therapist, Reich's theory and practice gradually became inadequate for me and so I turned to Freud and psychoanalytic theory.

I must stop and make a very important note here. If I were speaking as a citizen of England or France or any other European country, this cultural and educational itinerary would sound like a normal consequence of the social upheaval and politics of those years. But it was not at all normal for Greece, which had at the time very different concerns. During the 1950s and the 1960s, Greece, as I said, was developing rapidly in the midst of intense political conflicts, as well as a seven-year-long military dictatorship; which meant that it was struggling to establish democracy and a state of justice according to the institutions of Western democracies, based on notions of equality and human rights, institutions that already had a relatively long history in the rest of Europe. Greece on the contrary, had

comparatively recently emerged from Ottoman rule with its autocratic institutions and was trying hard to catch up with the rest of the Western world. This also means that Greece, apart from the 1821 revolution which established it as an independent national state, never went through any of the 'enlightened' movements and revolutions that formed the social and political milieu of the Western world. Greece was evolving from very different traditions originating mainly in the neighbouring Eastern world, trying to combine those with ideas imported from the West. I use the word 'imported' advisedly to indicate that the main core of these ideas never grew and developed organically in modern Greek soil. This has had direct consequences on how these ideas are used and worked through in my country.

All that being said, I think it is becoming more evident that both feminist and psychoanalytic ideas were at the time foreign, even threatening, bodies in the Greek cultural and political milieu and evolved as such until very recently. Feminist legal reforms were largely appropriated by the political parties. The so-called Second Wave of the feminist movement, with its central slogan 'the personal is political', was only adopted by small and politically weak groups of independent feminists. As for psychoanalysis, it really started very gradually becoming a part of Greek culture in the 1980s, when some of us began returning from various countries of the West where we had been studying and training.

It took me many years of working as a psychotherapist, of being in analysis myself, and of undertaking research dealing with the vicissitudes of becoming a modern Greek woman, to start to understand how difficult and complicated the constitution of subjecthood has been and still is, at least in my country, in its difficult and mostly unconscious efforts to combine the Eastern and Western traditions.

When, however, towards the end of the 1980s, I started thinking of a research project to examine how femininity is constituted in modern Greece through the mother-daughter relationship, all this was pretty confused in my mind and all I had as a given was my clinical practice and certain questions that arose from it (Vosniadou, 1994). My clinical practice, on the other hand, was deeply informed by my personal experience as well as by my ideological and theoretical quests and beliefs. It is not by chance that, from when I was very young, I struggled against what I took to be a deeply rooted oppression and denigration of women in my country, although I thought at the time that I myself was not paying its heavy cost. It was mainly this feeling of oppression that made me very sensitive to ideas that informed the movements of May 1968, which had to do with personal freedom, equality and difference. As I have already said, all these were only a very small part of the political scenery in Greece at the time, with a military junta oppressing all of us and driving us as a country at least 20 years backwards. Many people at that time in Greece were involved in resistance against the junta and there were very few of us who dared to think beyond that and keep our ears tuned to what was happening abroad. Perhaps that is why I needed to undertake the research I mentioned, in order to understand something that deeply concerned me while at the same time eluding me – something that concerned me as a human being of my time and society and, at the same time, went much beyond my own subjecthood.

The idea of a research project started to take form when I realized that I could use both my clinical experience and my knowledge of theory outside the therapeutic setting to study the effects of the rapid changes that took place during the second part of the twentieth century in the social position of Greek women, on women themselves as subjects. More specifically, the aim of the research was to follow in a systematic way the identificatory

processes of women through their relationship to their mother. Mother had proved to be a vital figure for women in my clinical practice, since she presented them with an almost insoluble riddle concerning their identity.

It took me considerable time and effort during the first years of the research to deal with matters of methodology. How to connect the psychological process with social change, which means how to connect the psychoanalytic theory with social theory. How to deal with the mother-daughter relationship, both on the level of an interpersonal relationship as well as on the level of the intrapsychic process and furthermore as a social institution (Vosniadou, 1997). My first methodological choice was to use the autobiographical interview to listen to and talk with the women, because it gave them the opportunity to use their narratives as they chose while, at the same time, it gave me the opportunity to see the ways that those specific subjects interpreted and organized their life experiences on three different levels: the level of how they are socially constructed, the level of their unconscious, and the level of their existential choices (Bertaux, 1981; Ferrarotti, 1981; Anderson et al., 1987; Bruehl-Young, 1998).

A very basic concern was the sociological perspective. I thought that for the aims of this specific research the best method would be to explore the social meanings connected with gender and especially with the concepts of femininity and motherhood. For this purpose I used a rich bibliography from social anthropology, especially as informed by feminist theory (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Dubish, 1986). Anthropological research has shown that in rural Greece the social meanings connected to femininity are completely collapsed with those connected to motherhood (Du Boulay, 1986). Which means that the traditional Greek woman, in order to exist as a social subject, has to function psychosexually through shame and guilt in order to turn her emotions inward and function mainly as a caretaker of her children and her husband, using as a model the figure of the Virgin Mary. Otherwise, she falls into the position of sinful Eve and is threatened with social exclusion. Anthropological research has also shown that to the degree that the institutions of marriage and family are still valid in Greece, these social meanings are valid as well. At the same time, however, and especially in urban areas, this ideology has been rapidly changing during the last 50 years and consequently these meanings are being rapidly transformed as well, leading anthropologists to talk of contested identities (Loizos and Papataxiarchis, 1991).

The processes through which the human being experiences, interprets and organizes the social meanings is also of concern to psychoanalytic practice and theory. Sexual difference is crucial to psychoanalysis as a basic axis of psychic constitution (Freud, 1924, 1925, 1931, 1933). In my own study I describe psychoanalytic theory from Freud to the present day with particular emphasis on how this theory deals with the constitution of gender, in other words how the human baby becomes a sexuated subject (Vosniadou, 2001). As in social anthropology a lot of psychoanalytic theory on this topic has been contested, both within the frame of the theory itself (Breen, 1993) and from the viewpoint of other theories, especially feminism (Baker-Miller, 1973; Strouse, 1985; Brennan 1989; Wright, 1992; Butler, 1990, 1993). A major point that has led to many interesting but conflict-filled discussions has to do with the positions of mother and father and how they influence the constitution of the subject to be. Freud himself, followed later by Lacan, insists on the primacy of the father (Mitchell and Rose, 1982; Sarup, 1992). Melanie Klein and others insist on the primacy of the mother (Mitchell, 1975; Kohon, 1986). In my own research I use studies

that deal mainly with motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship as constitutive for femininity (Vosniadou, 2001).

A second methodological choice was the combined use of three different theories: social anthropology, psychoanalysis, and feminist theory in their special dealings with matters of gender constitution and the role of motherhood in the constitution of femininity.

What mainly concerned me was to follow the ways in which women identified especially with the mother figure and how through these identifications they transformed inherent social meanings. I thought that it would be interesting to see these processes in the context of intergenerational research in order to follow the development of these processes, both in each woman, and in what is transmitted from one woman to another and from generation to generation.

Using the above methodological and theoretical references I chose to focus my analysis on the life histories of four women, representatives of three generations, belonging to one family whose history becomes manifest through their narratives. This example was chosen after I interviewed 10 women aged 30–45. Three of these first interviews presented a major interest for me due to the intense contradictions and conflicts of their narratives. Of these three I further chose the one that presented these conflicts in the most intense manner because I thought that it was exactly this tension that would reveal aspects of the identificatory process which I could not approach in another way. The women in the three generations covered an age span from 75 years old (the first generation), 49 and 38 (second generation) to 31 (third generation); they came from a middle-class background and had all had university education (Vosniadou, 2001).

The material that resulted from the analysis of the narratives of this case study gave me the opportunity to draw an indicative intergenerational map (Pile and Thrift, 1995). This means that this particular material did not lead me to specific conclusions but rather to localizing and further opening up certain significant (in my opinion) new passages on the particular map that the narratives of the women reveal. I am therefore trying in this study to follow these passages as they interface and transform three basic and interconnected concepts inherent to any discussion on the matter of subjectivity: those of self, identity and body. These passages lead the women of this case study from demanding emancipation in the first generation to a project of autonomy of the second and from there to negotiation of choice of the third generation.

The main theme that comes to the fore during the passage from the demand for emancipation of the first generation to the project of autonomy that concerns the second, is the gradual birth of a self-referring, reflecting self. As gender roles and positions are collapsing and are restructured during the process of radical change in women's social position, feminine desire, which was completely identified with motherhood, is split. From the first generation this process results in intense unconscious conflicts within the woman's psyche, as on the one hand she experiences motherhood detached from her desire, and, on the other, desire remains largely forbidden and consequently inhibited. In the second generation ambivalence comes to the fore and these conflicts are expressed openly both within the women themselves and towards the mother who is the real object from whom the daughters are trying to become emancipated. This open conflict helps the daughters to become familiar with confronting opposing and contradictory emotions, which means that they start becoming engaged in self-reference, negotiation and separation from images of traditional

femininity. This process, which is largely painful and not easily resolved for the women of the second generation, has positive effects for the woman of the third generation, in whom ambivalent conflicts interchange with creative restructurings, and negotiation of choice becomes the main project.

Within the frame of this process, another passage is being opened up, which mainly has to do with the identificatory process that, from the first generation, begins to change radically. The passage from the certainty of a traditional gender identity to the uncertainty of conflicting and contradictory identifications takes place from one generation to the next, through a continuous interaction between fantasy and reality on the level of the primary process. To the degree that, due to social changes, the parental figures do not constitute obligatory identificatory models, secondary identifications remain open and in this case it is fantasy that takes the initiative to give meaning and interpret what on an institutional and social level begins to be contested. And what in the final analysis is being contested is the hierarchical construction of gender difference, and consequently all the values, positions and roles that are connected to this constitution. Good and bad, right and wrong – and in this case we refer to the meanings of femininity and motherhood – necessarily merge and are redefined through the process of identifications. Through these upheavals and revisions, new kinds of identifications come to the fore, which do not discriminate strictly and hierarchically either between the sexes, or between good and bad, or between superior and inferior. On the contrary, these positions become interchangeable within the subjects, and despite the great psychic cost they lead towards the negotiation of various and different identifications.

This process, finally, directly affects the working through of emotions and consequently representations of biological sex and sexuality. From psychoanalytic theory we know that a woman has to pass through a kind of redirection of her genital instinct in order to be able to reshape her sexuality in the service of motherhood. Traditionally, she has been able to do this through the emotions of shame and guilt. These emotions, in our case, and through each woman's confrontation with her 'feminine destiny', gradually stop being connected with the constitution of femininity. If, for the woman of the first generation, these emotions are mainly unconscious, in the next generations they are articulated, contested and redefined. Sexuality stops being taboo – on the contrary it comes to the fore and is discussed and expressed. The female body starts to be talked about, described and discussed and consequently loses its stereotyped femininity. Furthermore, through language, which strengthens the negotiation of choice and the responsibility of cost, 'feminine destiny' starts gradually to be distinguished from its anatomical and biological context. The woman of the third generation, therefore, does not know whether she will choose to be a biological mother but she definitely learns how to be a competent symbolic one.

A last point that I would like to touch upon is that of the famous feminine ambivalence and of how, according to theory, it leads a woman to be less than a full social subject (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1989; Parker, 1996). The material of this case study showed that ambivalent conflict definitely plays a major role in women's psyches. The question, however, is 'what we will make of it?' If we see feminine ambivalence through the lens of the hierarchical gender polarization, then it is no less than the emotional background that keeps women hovering between their desire and the acceptance of their inferiority. If, however,

we see it, as I tried to in this research, as the emotional background that helps women to negotiate their desire, between on the one hand setting the boundaries useful to them and on the other continuing to fight for it, then working through ambivalence becomes the main axis of working through difference and complexity. In the case of the women who were my research subjects, ambivalence that starts out unconscious gradually confronts the women through the generations with their feelings of both love and hate, with both social demands and their own desire. Through confusion, uncertainty and endurance in conflicts and losses, women learn eventually to become autonomous human subjects, able to follow as well as affect the rapid changes of our times.

And let us not forget that autonomy was one of the key concepts in the social movements of May 1968. I am not certain though whether we knew then what hard work it would prove to be.

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